

Keynote Presentation I

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I've preached some good sermons. I've felt God's presence at my keyboard and in the pulpit. I believe that I have seen the Spirit work through my words. I have watched, on occasion, what I believe was the awakening of faith in my people. I expect that every preacher in this room can relate to this. I expect also that every one of us would agree that such an experience is a singular joy and wonder. I expect also that all the hearers in this room have experienced this at some point. We have all felt the Spirit in His preached Word and enjoyed the awakening of new knowledge and growth of faith.

It might seem somewhat subjective, and maybe even something akin to the error of enthusiasm, but I think that this experience is, for the most part, what we are thinking of or what we desire when we talk about "good preaching." By "good preaching" we don't simply mean accurate preaching or preaching free of error. We certainly want that but we aren't completely satisfied with that alone. When we speak of "good preaching" we mean preaching that asserts theological truth in such a way as to move the hearer's heart. The irony, of course, is that we are the same people who are prone to mocking John Wesley for the strange warming of his heart at the reading of the Gospel in the words of Luther as he heard it in Luther's Romans Commentary.¹

We should not mock that. Wesley wrongly attempted to build his faith on that experience and emotion. He also wanted to manipulate and control it. Our faith is not built upon spiritual experiences and emotions. It is built upon the Word of Christ. It is built by the Spirit in His Word even when there are no attendant emotions, or even when the attendant emotions are entirely negative.

Nonetheless, what Wesley felt was the gift of the Spirit. We should not mock that even as we should not think that it is ours to control. We should, however, thank God for it. While our faith is not built upon perceived joy and warmth, we, nonetheless, receive that joy and warmth when and where He gives it, gratefully. We are glad for it.

When I say that I want to be a better preacher, I mean that I want to apply myself to the Word of God and the craft of sermon writing and delivery in such a way that I am as open as possible to such moments, and that I might be a conduit of such moments for my flock. I am not seeking ways to manipulate the Spirit, but I do not want to deny Him either. Nor is it my goal to create mountaintop spiritual experiences for people; but, it is my goal to absolve them in the name of the Christ and to open the Scriptures to them and, as much as possible, I want them to be aware of what is happening.

The Spirit works through means. The gifts He gives to hearers of sermons, including joy, peace and a strange warming of the heart, should be sought. They should not be ignored or assumed. They might come apart from the preacher and his efforts, but that will surely be unusual for the preacher is the means of the sermon. The Bible isn't a magic book. God requires real work of preachers, real effort in their study

¹ Read Wesley's account here ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.ii.xvi.html.



and preparation, to produce a sermon that is not only accurate and clear, but also one in which the Spirit speaks, the Scriptures are opened and the faith of the hearers is moved.

My interest today is to articulate what characterizes and what is needed for “good preaching.” The implication is that, if we can recognize it, we can seek and even obtain it. I think that the first thing we need in this effort is an elevation of our view of preaching. We need to give it the reverence it deserves. Preaching is a central activity of the Church. It stands equal to nothing less than the Holy Supper. I think that, if we better understand what God has promised and our role in it, we will be better at it, more efficient and more deliberate. If we better recognize the weight of our work and the role of preaching in the life of the Church, we will work harder at it, and that will make our preaching better. Next, having set that in place, I want to consider in some very concrete ways what makes some sermons better or worse than others. I believe that the best sermons, those which awaken and excite the hearers’ faith, are theologically insightful and pointed and, at the same time, clear.

Much of this will be abstract and theoretical. So also much of it will be anecdotal. I don’t have hard evidence for my opinions on these things, and I recognize that they are opinions, not facts. I shall seek to cite where I can and draw attention to research that has been done as I know of it, but much of what follows will be more of personal reflection than academic research. I hope, nonetheless, to provide some practical advice about what I think preachers should be doing, what sorts of sources they should be using and what their goals and intent ought to be. I do not wish to be offensive or disrespectful, but I do intend to stir the pot some. I expect that some of what I say is going to sting. I hope that it will be understood that I am a working preacher, well aware that everything I say can and should be used against me. Everything I will complain about, I have done and am still doing. Nothing that I claim is necessary and right have I obtained or perfected or even been consistent in. I am not speaking from the ivory tower or some district office. I live in a glass house, and I am about to throw some stones. Nonetheless, I proceed because I think conversation on these things is helpful for us all.

A few of the preachers here might be wondering what this has to do with the laity. I have done enough of these things to discover that there is no need to worry. The laity love this stuff. They don’t preach, of course, but I am constantly surprised at how absolutely fascinated they are by preaching and how interested they are in the process. In fact, I think it puts the preachers to shame. We have allowed familiarity to make us lazy and callous. The reality is that the whole Church, including the laity, cares much more about preaching than preachers themselves have often realized.

Part 1

Rationale for preaching and for preachers

A theology of and for preaching

Increased Eucharistic piety has brought some difficulties for American Lutherans. The struggle for me has been trying to articulate a theology of the Word and preaching which acknowledges the Eucharist as the central and defining sacrament of the Christian and the Church while still maintaining its own centrality and importance.

Some might propose that there is no tension between preaching and the Sacrament. Yet if that were the case, if there were no tension, then why have we so often heard, if not said, things like “the Eucharist



delivers when my preaching fails?”² This statement does more than state the Gospel reality that the Eucharist always delivers grace to, and strengthens the faith of, all those who receive it worthily. The statement also assumes that preaching doesn’t.

That is fair. Preaching does, from time to time, fail. Preaching is not guaranteed to always deliver the Gospel to the faithful in the same way that the Sacrament of the Altar is. That is obviously the case when the sermon teaches false things, but it can also happen without false things. It can simply do nothing. The Sacrament of the Altar cannot fail apart from unbelief or hypocrisy on the part of the communicant if the words and elements are used in a Christian congregation. In contrast, however, a perfectly pious layman cannot make up with his hearing what the preacher lacked in his saying. The preacher can ruin the sermon, but the celebrant cannot ruin the Sacrament.

Perhaps the question is not that difficult, but it does need to be articulated and not just assumed. Here is what is at stake. Preaching can fail due to the preacher’s sin. Holy Communion cannot fail due to the celebrant’s sin in the same way; that is, Holy Communion cannot fail to deliver the Gospel to the faithful as long as the words and elements are used (LC V 16). This is of great benefit to the Church and is obviously God’s design. It protects us from the earthen vessels that serve us.

So how do preachers fail? I suspect that they fail mainly through negligence. They don’t preach the whole counsel of God, and they resort to clichés for Law and Gospel and for preaching the Sacraments. A negligent preacher harms his flock in a way that is similar to the way a negligent father harms his children. The duties of preacher differ from the duties of celebrant. The celebrant is only a voice in the office established by the Lord. The degree to which his personality, experience and skills come to bear are much less than they are in preaching. A negligent and even abusive father who gives his child a glass of orange juice can harm the child in many ways, but the juice he gives will provide the child with Vitamin C despite the father’s other failures. A pastor who is negligent in his preaching is used by the Lord to provide for His flock with the administration of the Sacraments despite his failings in other areas. Thus, it is fair to say, in a sense, that the Sacrament delivers when preaching fails. This is a gift to be received in gratitude, but not as an excuse for poor preaching.

The problem for preachers is that in preaching the preacher is called upon to do more than recite the words and hand over something that the Lord effects by His Word. Preaching is an entirely different sort of stewardship than being a celebrant. In preaching, the preacher is to interpret and apply God’s Word, and the preacher’s knowledge, personality and skill are involved. Negligence, as well as incompetence or laziness, has consequences for the flock.

At the same time, there is a promise. God established the office of preaching. Even as He provides through imperfect fathers, so also He provides through imperfect preachers. This isn’t meant to condone or turn a blind eye to failure. Failure that arises from laziness or negligence cannot be ignored. But lest we all be led to despair, we must recognize and confess that God works through earthen vessels despite our sins and failures. Love covers a multitude of sins. We really can’t say this enough: The Lord uses earthen vessels; that is, He uses chamber pots to carry His Spirit to His people.

² I could not find any printed materials that demonstrated this attitude. The observation here is purely anecdotal and personal, but I believe this idea is widespread amongst LCMS clergy.

There is something of the Incarnation in this. The Lord was unashamed to join us. He knows what it is to have diarrhea, to belch up acid and to have a runny nose. He made Himself an earthen vessel for our salvation. He is faithful to His Word. He has established the authority of the office in which His preachers have been sent, even though those preachers are fallible and shameful. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him, and it is in that precise authority, with that precise authority, that He sends preachers to preach and to baptize. The authority of preaching is Christ's own authority. God promises to make disciples through it.³

To get us to the conference theme, we well note that the Reformation reestablished preaching as a central activity of the Church's worship. Luther's opening paragraphs in *Concerning the Order of Public Worship* from 1523 are well-known, but important.

The service now in common use everywhere goes back to genuine Christian beginnings, as does the office of preaching. But as the latter has been perverted by the spiritual tyrants, so the former has been corrupted by the hypocrites. As we do not on that account abolish the office of preaching, but aim to restore it again to its right and proper place, so it is not our intention to do away with the service, but to restore it again to its rightful use.

Three serious abuses have crept into the service. First, God's Word has been silenced, and only reading and singing remain in the churches. This is the worst abuse. Second, when God's Word had been silenced such a host of un-Christian fables and lies, in legends, hymns and sermons were introduced that it is horrible to see. Third, such divine service was performed as a work whereby God's grace and salvation might be won. As a result, faith disappeared and everyone pressed to enter the priesthood, convents, monasteries and to build churches and endow them.

Now in order to correct these abuses, know first of all that a Christian congregation should never gather together without the preaching of God's Word and prayer, no matter how briefly, the psalmist says, "that they may declare in Zion the name of the LORD, and in Jerusalem his praise, when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the LORD" (Ps. 102:21–22). And Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 [:26–31] says that when they come together, there should be prophesying, teaching and admonition. Therefore, when God's Word is not preached, one had better neither sing nor read or even come together.⁴

It is surprising at first, but Luther may have valued preaching above both the reading of the Scriptures and the Sacrament.⁵ I suspect that we modern, confessional Lutheran preachers in America, not the laity, but the preachers, have tended to value the Sacrament of the Altar and perhaps the Bible over preaching. Even if we haven't quite made the error yet, we have, at the very least, skated close to the danger of undervaluing preaching. I do not mean by this that we overvalued the Sacrament or the Bible. I do think, however, that statements such as "the Eucharist delivers when my preaching fails" hint at an undervaluing of preaching. This might be because we are a bit insecure about the authority in which we've been sent. A

³I attempt to prove the issues of what Christ's authority and how it relates to preaching in an essay entitled "The Preacher's Tongue and the Hearer's Ear." Mark W. Birkholz, Jacob Corzine and Jonathan Mumme, eds. *Feasting in a Famine of the Word: Lutheran Preaching in the Twenty-First Century*. (Eugene: Pickwick Publishers, 2016.) This introduction is largely lifted from that essay and is somewhat of a summary of that essay.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 53: Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 53, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 11.

⁵This point also is argued in my essay "The Preacher's Tongue."



careful reading of the confessions and consideration of the topic can help to bring balance to preaching and Sacrament and place the Bible into its proper role as source and norm. Lutheran preachers can be unashamed of the authority of the preacher and the centrality of the sermon, and even the particular role of their personality and skill, without falling into the error of sacerdotalism. In fact, they must, because to deny this authority and promise is not to simply get a trivial detail wrong, but it is to undermine both the office that Christ has established and the place of His promise.

As I've already said, I think this is more of a preacher weakness than a lay weakness. The laity, I think, have always recognized the centrality of preaching. Every call document I've ever seen places Law and Gospel preaching at the very top of the list of what congregations desire above all else. Perhaps, at times, they've held this high view of preaching to the detriment of the Sacrament and thus the loss of every Sunday communion. It is, in a sense, a very Protestant idea,⁶ though that should not deter us.

In any case, if there has been an error — if we have undervalued preaching and overvalued the Bible⁷ or if we have misunderstood the relationship of sermon to Eucharist and Gospel — it has been mediated by tradition.⁸ The liturgy has reined us in where our understanding might have failed. Our actual practice, like traditional architecture,⁹ is not out of balance. Assuming we have communion every Sunday, if anything requires some adjustment, it is only our attitude; that is, how we think about preaching. That is not insignificant. Ideas have consequences. How we think about the sermon shapes how we prepare and also how we behave in the pulpit.¹⁰ Yet such a change is easier and less immediately obvious than a change in practice. Nonetheless, while I think we need to modify our thinking about these things in order to bring them into line with the Scriptures and the Confessions, I am not proposing a dramatic shift or new Reformation. I am simply advocating that we restore the sermon to its rightful place as the authoritative Word of God, the Gospel itself, in the Service.

To address the conference theme in this regard, we must note that Article V follows Article IV. They read thus:

Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4 [3:21–26; 4:5]).

⁶ Consider this quote from *ProPreacher.com* “Luther elevated preaching to the central part of the liturgy of the Church. As Alfred E. Gravie claims, “It was Luther who put the sermon in Protestantism in the place held by the mass in Roman Catholicism and made preaching the most potent influence in the churches of the Reformation.” propreacher.com/how-to-preach-according-to-martin-luther/#fn9

⁷ Again see “The Preacher’s Tongue” where this is fleshed out.

⁸ Consider this statement from Luther Reed: “The Gospel is the liturgical summit of the first half of the Service, the “Office of the Word.” Luther D. Reed. *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947), 281. That same language and idea is also echoed here: Scot A. Kinnaman, *Worshipping with Angels and Archangels: An Introduction to the Divine Service* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 21. “The Preacher’s Tongue” attempts to demonstrate that Luther, at the least, and probably also the Augsburg Confession, holds that the sermon is the high point of the Service of the Word.

⁹ The typical physical majesty of pulpits, greater than lecterns, confesses this idea in architecture.

¹⁰ Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948). Weaver’s thesis, and even his title, have lots of applications for the Church.



So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given [John 20:22]. He works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news that God justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake. This happens not through our own merits, but for Christ's sake.¹¹

According to the Augsburg Confession, the office of preaching was instituted by God to give the Gospel and Sacraments through preaching so that the people would obtain justifying faith. Preaching is a means by which God produces faith. Thus, it requires reverence. Reverence for preaching means that preachers must prepare and do the hard work they are called to do.

This is not a burden for preachers alone. Faith comes by hearing. Both preachers and hearers should reverence faithful preaching as Spirit-given holy speech that creates and sustains faith in God's children and not simply as brief lectures or periods of instruction. To be sure, the burden of preaching falls mainly to the preachers, but it is not theirs alone. Luther has harsh words for hearers in the Large Catechism about their duty to actively learn and to retain the Word preached in the sermon. I think it fair to speculate that Luther would not find it amusing if he discovered that a hearer left worship having already forgotten what the sermon was about. He writes that God's command shows that God will require an accounting of us all regarding what we have heard, learned and how we honored God's Word.¹²

All that is to say that we cannot take this too seriously. The call to make the Gospel plain in sermon is relentless even as the promise of the Gospel to save sinners is absolute.

Personality

The preacher's own faith, his experience of grace in the means of grace, particularly as a baptized Christian subsisting in the gifts given in the Lord's Supper and Absolution, along with his knowledge and training and life experience, are integral to the sermon the preacher delivers. Philip Brooks gave what is probably the most famous definition of preaching in the last 200 years. He claimed that "preaching is the bringing of truth through personality."¹³ While that is bound to rub some of us the wrong way, I think he was on to something. I think what he meant, and which we do well to ponder, is that the truth of the Gospel is delivered by God through a human being called by God. Preaching is not a cultural development or a convenient way to go about things but is a divine institution. The truth of the Gospel comes through a human being in a very concrete way which is unique to his personality. The preacher called by God is not a robot or a machine, without a past or experience, who simply spews out the King James Bible. He is a man who has been given by God particular attributes, skills and history. Those

¹¹ The quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, second edition; edited by Paul McCain et al., © 2006 Concordia. All rights reserved. AC IV; V, 33.

¹² See LC III 98. Again, I spend some time on this in essay "The Preacher's Tongue."

¹³ Philip Brooks, "Truth and Personality." *The Company of Preachers*. Richard Lischer, ed. (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids, 2002), 16. Much of this section of the essay originally appeared in an essay I wrote for *Gottesdienst* entitled "Preaching the Sacraments without Clichés," *Gottesdienst: The Journal of Lutheran Liturgy*. Vol. 25, no. 2, (Trinity 2017). Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959). Caemmerer includes this essay in his suggestion for further reading on Page 297 but does not comment in any way upon it.



things, the peculiarities of the preacher, of the man, help to shape and color the message which is defined by and is, in itself, the truth.

Perhaps this isn't quite what Brooks meant by personality, but it is close. I don't think he'd disagree with what I've said. In fairness though, he might have had the false notion that the preacher's faith caused the efficacy of the sermon. I reject that idea as does the Augsburg Confession,¹⁴ but I do not want to deny the reality that God desires men of faith in the office and that He uses their faith and personalities in service to the Gospel and preaching. Preachers cannot be separated from their personalities and shouldn't be. Even as the Lord does not call robots to the office, neither does He call holy angels. He calls men.

In any case, what Brooks argues about truth is fairly straightforward. We also believe in the inspiration and infallibility of God's Word. Brooks, however, thinks preaching is more than repetition. He makes the same point that I find stated in virtually every Protestant homiletics book I have seen. He wants preachers to do more than simply preach about Christ. He wants them to deliver Christ to their hearers.

That is a good point and an important one, but it is not as profound as many seem to think. It is a bit like bakers realizing they have to preheat the oven. It probably should be said. Nonetheless, the point that preaching must not simply be "about the Gospel" but actually proclaim the Gospel is not distinctively Lutheran or insightful. It seems that every Christian who contemplates preaching, at even the most shallow level, knows and understands that point. So if you want to say something, you have to say more than that, and Brooks does.

I am railing on this not because of Brooks, but because I've heard many Lutheran preachers who think they are superior to homiletics books make this very point as though they were on to something. They are in a sense, but not much. They are simply on to what everyone is on to. Professional preachers who haven't read more than one or two homiletics books in the past ten years should be ashamed of themselves. That is arrogant and disrespectful of the craft to which they've been called. God works through means. Though these books must be read with discernment and read carefully, we can learn a great deal from them. We should neither despise nor ignore them.

In any case, Brooks not only trusts that there is an objective Gospel which is defined by, and revealed in, Holy Scripture that must be the message of every sermon, but he also believes that the Lord has called and uses real human beings, and that their personalities are not in the least bit incidental. He believes, despite his confusion on many things, in an office of the ministry that has real people in it.

He states it rather boldly. In response, we might ask, "Isn't it the preacher's job to get out of the way and to not draw attention to himself and his personality?" Indeed, it is. With that idea, Brooks is in complete agreement. Again, this is equally true in my reading for everyone who writes about homiletics.

Brooks explains that his ideal preacher is a man who fully embraces and internalizes the Gospel. If the preacher hasn't done this, then his preaching will be superficial and his "personality" will get in the way. Brooks explains the negative in this way, "Here is the great difference which we feel between two preachers of the word. The gospel has come *over* one of them and reaches us tinged and flavored with his superficial characteristics, belittled with his littleness."¹⁵ When he claims that "preaching is the bringing

¹⁴ See AC VIII 2.

¹⁵ Brooks, 17.

of truth through personality” he does not mean that sermon should be tinged and flavored with the preacher’s superficial characteristics. The preacher’s personalities and idiosyncrasies are not the point and can get in the way. He does not desire that a preacher’s superficial characteristics take over the sermon, that he draw attention to himself as a person. Rather, in direct contrast to this, he desires that the Gospel not simply touch upon a man but take him over. In contrast to the one over whom the Gospel has come only in a superficial way, Brooks says of his ideal preacher that the Gospel comes *through* him:

The gospel has come through [him, the ideal preacher], and we receive it [the Gospel] impressed and winged with all the earnestness and strength that there is in him [the preacher]. In the first case the man has been but a printing machine or a trumpet. In the other case, he has been a true man and real messenger of God.¹⁶

He illustrates his concern about the person getting in the way and also his desire for a message that is imbued with zeal and urgency from a real man with real Gospel experience in this way, “The minstrel who sings before you to show his skill will be praised for his wit, and rhymes, and voice. But the courier who hurries in, breathless, to bring you a message, will be forgotten in the message that he brings.”¹⁷

Brooks’ concern is much the same as Paul’s in 1 Corinthians when he insisted that he did not come with lofty speech or wisdom despite the obvious beauty and rhetoric of his prose (1 Cor 2:1). I do not think that Brooks is advocating that we fill sermons with personal stories. He doesn’t want preachers to be like minstrels whose skills draw attention to themselves. What he wants is for the preacher to be a real man, a flesh-and-blood fellow, for whom the message is urgent and real. This, he believes, will give the man compassion and belief that conveys urgency and reality for his hearers. He believes that the best preaching is so absorbed in the reality of the message that the man delivering it is forgotten and only the message itself is remembered. Is that not precisely our goal? That we be forgotten, replaceable, but that the message be plain and remembered?

What Brooks means by personality then, and which we can and should get behind, is more than the uniqueness of each preacher, though that is included. This isn’t a matter of each of us being different in a special way, but rather that each preacher has unique experiences of the Gospel, and those experiences, grounded in the Word, drive his convictions. The Lord whom we proclaim does not love us all the same. That is because we are not all the same. He has made us each distinct and unique. He loves us all specifically and deliberately, going so far as to count every hair on our balding or graying heads. The Lord calls real men with real experience, and He puts it to real use to show the wonder of His grace. The Lord has called men to the office, not generic angels or printing machines. In what seems to me to be a very Lutheran move, Brooks ties this need for personality in preaching to the Incarnation itself, and he uses the Lord’s use of Apostles and the Apostolic ministry as an example.

Brooks was a Calvinist. He wasn’t concerned with preaching the Sacraments. He held to double predestination and other Calvinist errors. Nonetheless, I think his statement about preaching is worth consideration along with his warnings. He warns that it is possible for preachers to become deadened to the miracle of God’s presence and gifts, to become irreverent, because of their constant interaction with God’s gifts. It is possible, in our fallen state, to look at a pericope as something to be worked or squeezed or beaten into submission rather than as something marvelous to be received; that it is the very place

¹⁶ Brooks, 17.

¹⁷ Brooks, 18.



where God Himself speaks and delivers Himself to the hearer.¹⁸ Brooks says, “Familiarity does not breed contempt except of contemptible things, or in contemptible people.”¹⁹ Youch! Which of us is above reproach in this?

It is along these lines that Brooks closes his lecture with this final warning, which we do well to heed.

“You are lost as a preacher if . . . familiarity [with sacred things] deadens and encrusts, instead of vitalizing and opening your powers. And it will all depend upon whether you do your work for your Master and his people or for yourself. The last kind of labor slowly kills, the first gives life more and more.”²⁰

What I think this shows us is that the sacramental and liturgical life that Lutheran preachers need is a life that takes the Gospel seriously and not for granted. We are handling holy fire, and it is wonderful and dangerous at the same time. God does not give salvation without the Word and Sacraments, but in them He does. Faith is the proper response to God’s promises. It takes God at His word and trusts that in bread and wine, in water, and even in the words of mere mortals, the risen Christ is Himself present with us and for us. There we receive Him and recognize His gracious attitude toward us. Preaching, then, is a miracle and ought to be treated as such.

God is not static or neutral. Neither are we. He is actively working in the world, with real stuff, in history writ small and large, in personalities, on and for us, ever loving us in the things that He has instituted and given. Of utmost priority and importance, what He has instituted and given are His Word, preaching, Holy Baptism, Holy Communion and Holy Absolution. Yet He also works and is active in His grace throughout the Church, not only in the Sacraments, but also in the Church’s prayers and liturgies, even by its traditions and ceremonies, its art and architecture and music. All that is used to proclaim the Gospel, to make it plain, and all of that delivers the benefits of Christ’s death to those who believe His Word as means of grace.²¹

The preacher who is awake to these realities, who lives in them, who sees theological meaning and action not only in the Scriptures but all around him, and who does the theological work to which he has been called, studying the Scriptures and the Confessions, will find that he does not run out of material, nor will he find himself at a loss but for clichés and tired, over-used statements and metaphors. Rather, these things will simply come out of him, through his personality, even as they come out of the Scriptures themselves.

¹⁸ My favorite illustration of this is Billy Collins’ description of teaching poetry to college freshman, “Introduction to Poetry,” “I ask them to take a poem / and hold it up to the light / like a color slide / or press an ear against its hive. / I say drop a mouse into a poem / and watch him probe his way out, / or walk inside the poem’s room / and feel the walls for a light switch. / I want them to waterski / across the surface of a poem / waving at the author’s name on the shore. / But all they want to do / is tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it. / They begin beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means.” Billy Collins, “Introduction to Poetry” *The Apple that Astonished Paris* (University of Arkansas Press, 1996) last accessed on Aug. 21, 2017 at poetryfoundation.org/poems/46712/introduction-to-poetry.

¹⁹ Brooks, 21.

²⁰ Brooks, 22.

²¹ David P. Scaer, *Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace* (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 2008). Scaer devotes a short chapter to an argument for a broad use of the term “means of grace” for anything “in which the Gospel is communicated,” 168.



Part II

Excellence in preaching: Theology and clarity

Great preaching and bad preaching

Few of us question our ability to judge a sermon. We think that we know when we've heard a good sermon, even a great sermon. Ian Paul, who taught homiletics at St John's, Nottingham regularly asked his students to think of a good sermon that they had heard and likewise a bad sermon and then to describe each of them. He did this as an attempt to move his students away from theoretical answers and toward concrete answers. He states that no one had any hesitation in being able to identify and distinguish between good and bad sermons. He also claims to have found a consistent pattern in his students' descriptions. He writes,

When talking about good sermons, people almost uniformly focused on the *content* of what was being said – there was a good message, it was rooted in the Bible, it related to my questions, it gave me something to think about. There was rarely any comment on the delivery of good sermons. By contrast, when talking about bad sermons, the majority of comments focused on the issue of *delivery* – it was monotone, the preacher had some annoying habits, I couldn't hear clearly, it was repetitive and didn't go anywhere . . . and so on.²²

I was involved in a Facebook group of LCMS clergy devoted to discussing preaching. The question was posed there as, "What is the problem with preaching in the LCMS today?"²³ Like Paul, I noticed a lot of repetition. The question wasn't indirect like Paul's, so the comparison is difficult. Unlike Paul's students these pastors complained mostly about content and theology. After that they complained about the pastor's moral failures. Only then did they pick up on problems of delivery. The group's analysis of the problem with preaching in the LCMS today can be broken down as follows, with the most frequent and vociferous complaint first and the last at the end.

1. The sermons are not textual. They don't open the Scriptures to the hearers.
2. The sermons do not properly distinguish between Law and Gospel or otherwise lack theological weight.
 - a. The sermons fail to proclaim the Gospel.
 - b. The sermons fail to proclaim the Law or fail to preach the whole counsel of God and the third use of the Law.
 - c. The sermons blend or otherwise confuse Law and Gospel.

²² Ian Paul. "What Makes a Good Sermon?" *Psephizo* (blog), Jan. 23, 2015, psephizo.com/preaching-2/what-makes-a-good-sermon/.

²³ The summaries and characterizations of this group's questions and responses are subjective. I have no way of linking to the material or reproducing it as it originally stood. What follows is simply my attempt to analyze and systematize a very casual and unsystematic survey and response that took place in a private group. The questions were not posed for my purposes. They simply came up in the group. So also, as far as I know, I am the only one to attempt to systematize, prioritize and summarize the answers.



3. The preachers do not understand the purpose of a sermon.
 - a. The preachers fail to preach the Gospel as performative speech or as absolution.
 - b. The preachers fail to speak at the appropriate level for the audience or the preachers simply haven't taken the time to know and love their hearers.
 - c. The preachers fail to apply the text to the lives of the hearers or the preachers do not understand the role of preaching in and for pastoral care.
 - d. The preachers preach "about the Gospel" instead of "proclaiming the Gospel."
4. The preachers' moral failures cause their sermons to fail.
 - a. The preachers are lazy and do not do the work required to produce a good sermon.
 - b. The preachers are theologically incompetent.
 - c. The preachers lack a passion for the Gospel or for doctrine.
 - d. The preachers do not love the hearers or the text.
5. The preachers' lack of public speaking skills or writing ability makes for bad sermons.
 - a. The preachers do not understand or know how to tell stories, to make the Scriptures come alive.
 - b. The preachers do not tie their sermons to bigger themes and the seasons or to the world and the lives of their hearers.
 - c. The preachers do not present a thesis statement, a single clear idea, or have a unifying theme.

While the answers didn't perfectly parallel Paul's analysis, they are not contradictory. There are a lot of ways for a sermon to fail. I think it is fair to say that the Facebook group was looking deeper than Paul's students were, and it is likely that this is because of the question they were asked. It could be, however, that Paul's question shed more light. In any case, the emphasis of the Facebook group was pointedly on what causes the problem rather than how the problem exhibits itself.

The complaints from the Facebook group are somewhat harsh, but I think that the list accurately gives the most common causes of poor sermons. Probably any one of the things listed in the Facebook group's analysis, let alone a number of them, would make for a bad sermon.

The same group was then asked to think about preachers whom they consider to be the best preachers they have ever heard. The post asked: "What did they all have in common?" and "What separates the (preachers) who excelled from those who didn't?" The Facebook group's overwhelming response was that a great sermon was not only orthodox and exegetically correct but it also held their interest. Their opinions about what held their interest varied some, but, contrary to Paul's students, mostly fell to matters of delivery and rhetoric. I am again listing these in order from the most common praise or analysis to the least.

1. The most excellent preacher is a good public speaker.
 - a. He presents his message with clear ideas.
 - b. His sermon is interesting, insightful or provocative.
 - c. He conveys passion and conviction.
 - d. He has a good relationship with his hearers.



2. The most excellent preacher has good content.
 - a. His sermon is dominated by the Gospel.
 - b. His sermon is textual.
 - c. His sermon has the right balance and proper distinction of Law and Gospel.

Part of what this demonstrates is that the Anna Karenina principle can be applied to sermons. The principle is simply that there are endeavors in which a deficiency in any one of a number of factors will cause a failure, and, at the same time, that a successful endeavor will only be the one where every possible deficiency has been avoided. “The name of the principle derives from Leo Tolstoy's book *Anna Karenina*, which begin, ‘Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.’”²⁴ In terms of preaching, it could be stated as, “All good sermons are alike, while every bad sermon is bad in its own way.”

The response to the question of what is wrong with LCMS preaching included complaints about volume, clear enunciation and the like, but the description of excellent preachers did not include praise about good volume, clear enunciation and the like. What I have placed under “good public speaking” is mostly rhetoric; that is, how ideas are arranged and presented for persuasion. Whereas a bad sound system can ruin any sermon, it will take good rhetoric or good ideas and content to make an adequate sermon excellent.

We sometimes dismiss rhetoric as though it was merely flourishes. That is a mistake. What I mean here is content at the deepest level and not simply style as a surface-level component. The arrangement of ideas, the order of things and the emphasis they are given, along with use of apt analogies and metaphors, affect not only the plainness (to use our conference theme) of what is preached but also the meaning of what is preached. The best sermons make the Gospel, that is the proclamation that God justifies the sinner through faith for the sake of Christ, plain and clear to the hearer who is able to see and believe that he is the sinner whom God justifies. Some self-awareness in preachers of what makes for, and is common in, an excellent sermon would be helpful.

Specifics

My subcategories from the Facebook group for “the excellent preaching is a good public speaker” are as follows:

- a. He presents his message with clear ideas.
- b. His sermon is interesting, insightful or provocative.
- c. He conveys passion and conviction.
- d. He has a good relationship with his hearers.

I don't think this can be said enough: the most common response to what made a preacher excellent was that he presented his message with clear ideas. An excellent preacher has a theological point to make, and he makes it clearly. Those are the two things that deserve our attention. Reverence for what God gives through preaching and for the hearers require sermons to have a theological point and that the point be made clearly.

²⁴ Wikipedia contributors, "Anna Karenina principle," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Anna_Karenina_principle&oldid=768697367. Accessed March 25, 2017.



The preachers in the Facebook group weren't extolling the virtues of just any public speaking but specifically of Gospel preaching. That came out clearly in their second most common response: the best preachers' sermons were "dominated by the Gospel," were "textual," and had "the right balance and proper distinction of Law and Gospel."

The best sermons are not simply text studies. The best sermons are tied to, and open up, the whole history of Israel, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the New Testament in His blood and the life of the Church. Sermons that strive to simply be biblical typically fail. Being biblical is not enough. It is like the canard earlier of preaching about the Gospel instead of preaching the Gospel. The best sermons are more exercises in systematics than they are in exegesis. Sermons are never about teaching any single text in isolation. The historical reality of what happened in Israel is in no way enough. We aren't writing history books. All this to say that we are preaching people into faith. So the best sermons are always teaching the whole counsel of God and the analogy of faith even though most of the time only one point is emphasized or mentioned.

I think this is one of the areas where our training might have misled us. I believe that the *Book of Concord* and Pieper's dogmatics are better guides for, and examples of, preaching than the Concordia Commentary series. I know that seems off, but I think that it is true. I am not denigrating the commentaries. They are wonderful, and I thank God for them. I am a subscriber. They give essential background material, the historical reality and insights, but they don't preach. In contrast, most of the *Book of Concord* could be read directly from the pulpit as a sermon. I fear our commentaries have often been misused in this regard and our dogmatics have been sorely neglected. The preachers have been overwhelmed by their textual studies, caught up at times in a pseudo-academic world better suited for the Society of Biblical Literature and thus rendered unable to make a clear point or to make a point that matters in the lives of their hearers.

The best preachers proceed deliberately, with a plan. They know what their point is, where it comes from in the Bible, and how it is supported by the confessions and Lutheran dogmatics. They also understand how that point applies to their people and how their people might be confused about it. They state this idea clearly and succinctly. They have a thesis statement. They stay on track with it. This makes them easy to understand and follow. They intend to communicate so their goal isn't to be profound or clever. It is to teach.

The best sermons don't happen by accident or spontaneously. I've heard men casually dismiss the idea that they ought to spend hours each week preparing a sermon by pointing to their experience. When asked something about how long they take to prepare a sermon they respond with something like "20 years." I get the point, but I don't respect that answer. Preaching requires reverence. It is serious work. It demands serious effort. While our knowledge is cumulative, and there are times when there is no time or very little time to prepare, none of us, no matter how seasoned, should rest on his laurels or think that he has learned enough or that the hearers deserve less than our best effort. We are called to deliver prepared sermons.

Engaging the Imagination

Preachers are inspired by the Holy Spirit. They engage in a mystical, sacramental activity by which God bestows His Holy Spirit and faith upon the people. That was the point of the first part of this presentation and it is obvious in the best sermons. But how can a preacher give the Holy Spirit unless he has Him? Preachers are not directly inspired. Rather, they have a conduit for inspiration: the Bible and the Bible takes work. It is not magic. I suppose that the Bible could work simply by being read in a cursory way like a novel, but that is not promised. What is promised is that God speaks through the Scriptures. Francis Pieper in his section on the perspicuity of Scripture reminds us that "a diligent reading of Scripture is



directly enjoined in the Old and the New Testament. (Ps. 1:2; Deut. 6:6-9; John 5:39; Col. 3:16; 1 Tim. 6:3ff.).”²⁵ This is where commentaries come in. The Bible needs to be studied. It needs to be reflected upon and contemplated. That takes time and effort. Hearing the Spirit in the Scriptures is not something that we can exactly pull up on demand; yet, at the same time, it is a skill that we can develop and get better at. What we preachers need, in my opinion, is not just more work but also an understanding of what that work is and how it functions. What is needed I think, is a sanctified and active imagination, not a scientific approach or list of rules and steps.

At first blush, the word imagination might seem contrary to the necessary truth claims which Christianity makes for faith and the Scriptures. The God of Holy Scripture and of the Church’s creeds is not imaginary. He is real. The Scriptures are factual histories, not fiction. Those assertions are perhaps more necessary today, in our increasingly secular society, than ever before; though, in fairness this has always been a necessary confession. There is probably no better example of this than God’s self-revelation in the name He gives to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus 3. He is the One Who Is. There is no other. He is reality. There is no other.

To say that our God is not imaginary, however, is not to say that we don’t imagine Him. To remember something is to imagine it. The people and events we imagine when we remember are real, historic. When we remember what God has said, who He is, what He has done for us, we are imagining. So also predicting what will happen when you pour alcohol on an open flame requires imagination. I suppose that we might think of trust in God’s promises in a purely intellectual way, but we can’t do that; we hope. Hope requires more than intellect. It is built in and requires imagination.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

If we had no imagination, we could not foresee that those who have died are only asleep. Our eyes can only see a dead body. But in Christ we have hope. Thus, we imagine the day to come when God will raise all the dead and bring those who believe in Him to Himself, in their newly perfected bodies, even as He will also, on that day, perfect those who are still alive in their bodies who believe in Him and they will be caught up in the air with those who had died in the faith to be delivered into a new heaven and new earth. Paul’s words demand that we envision this future reality in our mind’s eye even though our physical eyes have not seen it nor have we ever experienced such a thing. The Holy Spirit requires us to engage our imaginations.²⁶

²⁵ Francis Pieper. *Christian Dogmatics*. Vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950–53), 321.

²⁶ I attempt to give a fuller exegetical account of this in “Sanctified Imagination.” *Gottesdienst: The Journal of Lutheran Liturgy*. 23, no. 3, (Michaelmas 2015).



The definition of imagination given by Webster might help. It is that imagination is “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality.” Seen in that light, it is not difficult to understand that faith is itself an act of the imagination because faith believes things that are not present to the senses. Consider the statement of Our Lord to Thomas: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). So also, the important passage from Hebrews:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (Heb. 11:1–3)

Based on these passages we might define faith as the mental image or conception of God that is given by the Spirit through His Word which is not given through the physical senses. Not flesh and blood, nor sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell nor reason, has revealed this to us, but our Father who is in heaven, through His Word, has revealed Himself to us. (Matt. 16:17).

This isn’t new territory for Lutherans. Not only must God be revealed to faith but so also must the authority of the Scriptures.

We believe, teach and confess that because the Scriptures have God as their author, they possess both the divine power to make men wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (causative authority), as well as the divine authority to serve as the church’s sole standard of doctrine and life (normative authority). *We recognize that the authority of Scripture can be accepted only through faith and not merely by rational demonstration.* As men of faith, we affirm not only that Holy Scripture is powerful and efficacious, but also that it is “the only judge, rule, and norm according to which, as the only touchstone, all doctrines should and must be understood, and judged as good or evil, right or wrong.”²⁷

The authority of Scripture cannot be demonstrated to reason. It is given to the imagination, that is, to the faith which trusts in Christ whom the believer has not seen. Our trust in Scripture “is basically faith in Christ, because the Bible, and this is true of the whole Bible, is testimony concerning Christ.”²⁸ In other words, our faith isn’t in a book. It is in the Lord that is revealed in that book. The Spirit, through the Bible, conjures up in the mind’s eye of the modern believer a picture of Christ, or, at the very least, a mental construct of Christ, whom he has never seen with his eyes, which is to say that the Bible not only requires the believer to engage his imagination but that it also enables and feeds his imagination.

Christians thus can and do read the Bible and engage their imaginations. Preaching must also do this and do so based upon Scripture. Though the two can’t really be separated, it is worth noting that preaching is more than simply kerygmatic; it is also catechetical. Both what is proclaimed and also the catechesis in

²⁷ “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles,” The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973), 3–4. Emphasis added.

²⁸ Herman Sasse, “Scripture and Faith: The Lutheran View” lutherantheology.wordpress.com/2011/08/17/scripture-and-faith/. While Sasse might go a bit too far in this essay, his distinction between the Lutheran and Fundamentalist view of inspiration is important and is clearly stated.



preaching should inform the Christian's imagination. Preaching should both awaken the imagination and, at the same time train it. In some ways we might say that what all great preachers have in common is that they open the Scriptures to us in such a way that they stir up in us a faithful imagination and meditation, and thereby bring us into the presence of Christ who is not present to the physical senses but is most certainly, according to His promise, present.

The concept of imagination in preaching is not widespread in my reading, but it is not entirely unknown. Fred Craddock in *As One Without Authority* and also Francis Rossow in *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively* both deal with it. What I have not found anywhere, though, with the exceptions of Kleinig's *Grace upon Grace*, where he deals with it briefly but explicitly, and Paul Scott Wilson's *God Sense: Reading the Bible for Preaching*, is anyone advocating an active use of the imagination for exegesis.²⁹ I think this an important topic, and I don't think it has had much attention. I think it may be the unrecognized reality that separates the best sermons from adequate sermons; that is to say that, the best sermons are imaginative, not only in how they apply God's Word to the lives of the believers but also in how they read and interpret the Scriptures. In the best sermons the preacher's imagination has been stirred and awakened in the text so that he has been in God's gracious presence.

The preacher's imagination has been engaged in his prayerful meditation on the Word. The fruit of that is then conveyed to the hearers in the sermon. The best preaching awakens the faithful imaginations of the hearers. It enables them to meditate on God's Word. It also brings them by the Spirit into the gracious presence of God. That presence is not seen or known by physical sense, but it is real. The awakening of the hearer's imagination might be another way to express what Luther calls "serious concern" in the hearer, wherein he strives not only to hear the Word but also to learn and retain it.

A theological reading of the Bible for preaching

That sounds a lot like allegory, and it is. We have been bamboozled by rationalism and the historic critical movement. We have let them set the categories and agenda for exegesis so that our primary concern has been historic and scientific rather than theological. We have half-forgotten that the Bible has spiritual, theological meaning; that to be inspired by the Holy Spirit means that there is more there than merely history. There are three books in this regard that are very helpful. The first I've already mentioned, *God Sense: Reading the Bible for Preaching* by Paul Scott Wilson. Wilson does an excellent job of laying out Luther's two-fold literal sense which we've often misunderstood as being a single sense that is merely historic. He also lays out how we've been influenced, wrongly, by higher criticism into seeking a scientific approach to interpretation that would free us from the tyranny of subjectivism. This has caused us problems because, again, ideas have consequences. It has even caused us at times to ignore our heritage and the wealth of exegesis that has preceded us.

²⁹ It is difficult to prove the absence of something, and I can't claim to have read everything that has been written or as thoroughly as I might have, but I did search for this concept in most of the standard books of the new homiletic and classic Missouri sources. I have treated Kleinig in a section in my D.Min project dissertation which I expect to finish by the end of 2017. It ought then to be available from the Wayne & Barbara Kroemer Library at Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, Ind. Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority Revised and with New Sermons* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001). John W. Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008). Francis C. Rossow, *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1983). Paul Scott Wilson, *God Sense: Reading the Bible for Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).



An example of a well-intended, but wrongly influenced approach, from this has been the laying out of numbered lists of precisely worded hermeneutical principals. This is relatively modern phenomena. It has mostly fallen out of favor, but we should be aware of its roots and history. Luther never made such a list. A faithful reading cannot squeeze his exegesis to fit into lists of rules. Nor can purveyors of such lists completely agree on a single list. In this regard, we would do well to read the classic book on Luther's exegesis that was published as a companion volume to the original American edition of Luther's Works by Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*.³⁰ It is not simply arrogant, it is also crazy, to think that we can have the doctrine of our forefathers apart from their exegesis.

In *God Sense*, Wilson stops short of advocating for a return to the medieval four-fold sense of Scripture. He is aware of its problems. He does, however, redeem it from our mis-conceptions about it and points out that a theological reading of the Bible does these things naturally – as he claims Luther did. Luther's exegesis, however, isn't Wilson's main concern. It is Pelikan's main concern. Pelikan, in a more authoritative and deliberate way, deals directly with Luther and what seems to be Luther's frequent employment of allegory. The two books therefore work well together.

The final book that I want to recommend in this regard is *Discerning the Mystery* by Andrew Louth.³¹ Louth recognizes a disassociation of feelings and thought and a rise of the scientific method that applies itself to the humanities, including theology. His enemy here is, to a large degree, the historical critical method, but he rightly recognizes that there are other ways the enlightenment has changed the Church's approach to theology. He doesn't talk much about exegesis directly but, ultimately, all theology is exegesis. His proposed remedy is a return to the past method of allegory and tradition in a markedly Roman way. This is unacceptable to us but, nonetheless, Louth has much to say regarding allegory's merit against the historical critical method and for the discovering of God's intended meaning that should be of interest to us.

Conclusion

Much has been left unsaid or buried in footnotes. I particularly wish there was time here to explore the idea and necessity of reading the Bible theologically. I intend to make more of this in the future as I think this is fertile but neglected ground. I hope this essay, despite its shortcomings and our time limit, will serve to help preachers and hearers alike grow in their appreciation of the sermon's central role in worship and God's promises for it. I also hope that we will all, with the help and by the grace of God, leave this essay with renewed vigor and commitment to do the hard work of preaching, that we will commit ourselves to getting better at it. Finally, I pray that we might all better appreciate, enjoy and embrace those times when God uses preaching to excite and awaken our faith and recognize there the Holy Spirit's voice.

³⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959).

³¹ Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Wichita, KS: Eighth Day Press, 1983).



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